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MONTHLY SERMON

BY

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LOW MORALITY AND SOME OF ITS CAUSES.



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LOW MORALITY

AND SOME OF ITS CAUSES.

TEXT.—Matt. vii. 21: “Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

We are just passing, again, through one of those painful periods in which the secret disorders of business and social life are, somehow, brought to the surface, and evils and shames which are habitually covered from the public eye, however the initiated are aware of them, become visible to all.

All England—the world, indeed,—has been disgusted at revelations of low taste, vulgar immorality, and probably contemptible dishonesty among the class who are at the top of its artificial social order. Here, at our own doors, we have learned of frauds so enormous, so barefaced, that one's breath stops in amazement at the effrontery of the men who could perpetrate them; living, during long periods of time, lives of rascality more infamous than the burglar's trade, while outwardly maintaining decency, conforming to the practices of religion, and retaining their social standing and the confidence and respect of their fellows.

We cannot but wonder at the *recurrence* of such offences. Is there, then, no moral *progress* in the world, that social vices, long stamped with the reprobation of respectable men, still flourish? That business, which is the chief occupation of society, seems still so deeply infected with dishonor? We talk of enlighten-

ment, we are vain of material development, of the increasing comfort and richness of life,—and then we look at this dark side of the picture and it seems as if it were no real gain that outward civilization should advance. If such progress is to give men more luxury, but no more rectitude, no more dignity, no more of the spiritual in them, of what use is it all? If men are to stay *animals*, it only makes animalism more offensive that it should be set off against a background of art, science, manners, comfort, carried to a high pitch.

When you find low vice in the slums, you hardly wonder,—what is there, there, to encourage to pure living? But when you find men who have had all the advantages the world can give them; in whose hands are all the resources of refinement; whose stations in life make them conspicuous, and secure them all the privileges of the world;—when you find *these* addicted to sensuality and low pleasures, you are discouraged.

You are not surprised when some street-dealer tries to outwit you in his petty bargain; but when men who are capable of directing great affairs; who are already successful to a degree which insures them all the enjoyments of life; who have character and standing at stake;—when *these* resort to vile trickery; actually conspire in villainy, abetting each other's knaveries to increase their gains,—you feel that there must be some general evil causes pervading our institutions, infecting our principles, and our views of life, and making what seems fair and solid actually unsound and unwholesome.

And, indeed, while it would seem that there *must* be more honesty than dishonesty in the world, more goodness than badness in men, or the social structure must fall, yet it appears to be admitted by business-men themselves that the prevailing principles of business are not those of a high rectitude; that they are pervaded by selfishness and cunning to the verge of dishonesty. There is a widespread skepticism of the *practicability* of strict honesty in business. Certain conventional principles must be observed, men say, or

business could not go on. But anything like *ideal* rectitude would be hopelessly out of the question. It may be well for men to hear the maxims of a gospel-morality, on Sundays, to keep them from sinking *too* low, but such principles would never work in practical life. It were idle to talk of the Golden Rule in business,—the Silver one is the best men can possibly follow, and it is an attainment to pursue even that in strict honesty.

Thus, these grosser instances of dishonor, of palpable fraud, seem to become only exaggerated examples of what is a prevailing disease.

What can be the sources of such a state of things? What influences are wanting? What safeguards have been neglected?

Of course, we go back easily to what seems to be the root of the matter, and say it is the love of money that causes all this trouble. "The love of money is the root of all evil," said the Apostle. No doubt there is much in the circumstances of our time which gives to the desire for riches an especial power. If to get an ordinary living is, perhaps, harder than formerly, the chances of securing large wealth by skilful operations are greater than ever. Riches procure for men much more of gratification, too, than ever before. The avenues of enjoyment are multiplied ten-fold, and they lie widely open before every man. Elegance of living, elaborate pleasures, the delights of art, of travel, are purchasable at a moment's notice by him who gets money.

And even these tangible fruits of riches are not so strong an impelling motive as another, which affects, especially, the class of men capable of manipulating the great enterprises of which we hear. Even with the majority of energetic business-men, the love of the pleasures money may procure is a secondary motive. The principal one is eagerness in the game itself of money-getting. It is a great scramble, in which the most energetic, active, acute, vigilant wins the highest prize

and the greatest notoriety. And men love the excitement of the game; love to feel and show themselves successful; love, especially, the growing sense of power which comes with increasing wealth. The super-abundant energy of an active race finds now that satisfaction in the struggles of business which, in time past, it found in perpetual warfare.

But, really, neither of these conditions is a necessary cause of the demoralization which, pervading business-life, occasionally shows itself in these terrible lapses from integrity. Both are, theoretically at least, compatible with honor, and are shown to be so by the many examples of men, successful in business, who maintain complete integrity, at least according to the highest standard of business-life. So far as these considerations are important, the difficulty chiefly is that such motives are too much unbalanced by other and higher ones. The attainment of wealth is the *sole* object of desire for most men. They have not the kind of culture which should make some other things, of a nature more refined and elevating, attractive to them, so that they can be content with moderate riches, in order to have leisure for some art, or science, or public-spirited work. The reaction of such alternative and higher desires upon a man's regard for money is most wholesome. In some it is powerful enough to make them indifferent altogether to anything more than the livelihood they *must* have. In any man some refined taste or generous purpose tends to check mere greed.

And this is *morally* favorable. Much avarice and dishonesty arise in a kind of *morbid* desire for money which is due to its being the one only thought in a man's mind. It comes to occupy his whole horizon. It dwarfs all other objects. He *must* have it. By and by it impairs his sense of the value of perfect integrity. Mere acquisition can never be an ennobling object. If a man's occupation is acquisition, he needs to have in his mind some motives that are essentially elevating, to keep his character balanced and secure.

And thus we may trace the ignobility which discovers itself to us in the business-world, largely to the want of a more generous culture. Our educational methods are improving, but they still fail, it is probable, to supply to young minds very clearly or largely, the idea of these more gracious objects of desire in life. To some extent they do. A business-man is sometimes heard objecting to the colleges that a youth who has been through one of them is likely never to be so eager in business as he would have been if he had gone into an office at seventeen. There could not be a better tribute to the effect of a liberal education. It means that the youth has caught the gleam of pursuits which he feels to be superior and preferable to mere money-getting,—and he will thenceforth prefer simpler standards of living, that he may have the delights of the intellect and the sensibilities. This ought to be the effect of our whole educational system; to show our youth where they may find real, abiding resources for happiness in life; to diminish not enterprise or energy, but greed; to direct ambition and energy into paths where they will be rendering refined service to the world, and enlarging and refining the mind of the man himself. How much better a community of whom a fair proportion were willing to live simply, because they loved the pursuits of art, or science, or literature more than self-indulgence, or the mere acquisition of wealth. Necessity and ambition will always bring forward enough to conduct the business pursuits,—and how much better, as I suggested, that these, too, should have their business-ambition tempered by sensibility to beauty, the desire of mental development, and interest in the welfare and progress of the world!

But all this, still, is only indirect, or preparatory. It would provide in a measure an atmosphere favorable to rectitude. It has no *direct* moral effect, and plainly we need agencies that shall provide that.

We may complain of our general educational methods

that they lack moral quality. Our schools develop the intellect,—I doubt if there is, usually, much in the process of a youth's education, as now conducted, to quicken his moral sensibility. The discipline and spirit of a good school tend in that direction. The influence of some individual teachers does so. No doubt the effective agency in moral training must always be general and incidental. I doubt if express and formal lessons in morals do much good, usually. But I fear that few teachers adequately feel their responsibility on this side, and the mere process of intellectual training may be negative, or even unfavorable, morally.

But while so much of our children's lives is spent in school, or employed in school affairs, that the whole process of their education there ought to be pervaded, sensibly, by high moral influences, the most important part of it must always be what they receive from home and society. And our deficiencies here are apt to be more glaring than those we might note in their school life. Comprehensively, the evil lies in the wrong aim which is cultivated in each young generation by the influence of the older. What ought youth to set out valuing and aiming at? Why, you know well,—character. Character and *true* happiness,—the happiness that comes from the diligent effort to adjust one's life and its true principles and to make it of real service to the world. The young ought to be imbued with generous, public-spirited aims. They ought to be taught simplicity and moderation, which are essential conditions of sound character and true happiness. Enterprise and vigor should be cultivated in them, but they should be guided to direct them nobly. Temperance, modesty and thoughtfulness should be taught them, too,—not to hinder energy and activity, but to create in them the mood in which they may justly weigh the objects life presents to their desire and ambition.

But, at present, the almost exclusive aim cultivated in the young by the spirit of the times, the example of their elders, and the actual ordering of life before their

to

eyes, is *self-promotion*; and this particularly in the attainment of wealth and worldly success. Even learning is not offered them, generally, in the high disinterested spirit which displays its true value; not as end in itself, but almost always, as the means of "getting-on." All this is called "practicality;" but there is a finer practicality which would elevate the whole character of our social life, could it be made general, and would be a protection against many of our social disorders and vices. It is that which should recognize that the virtues of character and the pure activities of the intellect are the true sources of happiness, and should adjust the machinery of life and the promotion and attainment of these. It is this that might calm that fever which burns in the veins of our generation and renders it so often the victim of its own false ambitions.

This finer practicality can only be the fruit of a more solid general culture. We may gladly recognize that our educational methods are tending to provide this more adequately. They are gaining in genuineness and thoroughness. And this, both brings out the essential value of mental culture and its fruits, and has a powerful *moral* influence. In the study of an *art*, the principles of rectitude, sincerity, purity of motive, elevation of aim may all be instilled and practiced truly and effectively. Education among us has been very superficial. As it becomes thorough we shall see the class, of whom we begin to have examples, who can love art, love science, love literature better than wealth the only object and fruit of which are power, self-indulgence and ostentation.

But, as we look upon these instances of criminality in business, there is a broader and more positive cause to be noted, of which the influence in undermining conscience, in arresting the development of the moral sense, is very deep and widely pervasive, though it certainly is not yet recognized as it will come to be. I have spoken of the ill effect which the spirit of the *world* has on the motives of growing youth. But, in

the character of the *religious* cultus which prevails in Christendom, there is a source of moral detriment not less real and serious. *I believe that in its practical working the system of theology which wears the name Christian exerts, both negatively and positively, a profoundly demoralizing influence upon the communities in which it is established, and becomes, perhaps, the chief cause of the low moral tone of society.*

This is a strong statement, and it may appear harsh. But I hold it to be just, and that we ought clearly to see the fact and to point it out to our neighbors who rest confidently in the system of orthodox Christianity.

Observe, distinctly, that I charge this demoralizing influence upon a *theology*: that is, upon the theories maintained of men's nature, the object of their career, their relation to God, their future destiny and its conditions. Alongside its theology Christendom has received from the past, and especially from the Gospels, a body of moral and religious truths of the highest and purest strain, which, if obeyed and incorporated into the conduct of life and the training of the young, genuinely, should have borne fruit in an almost ideal condition of society. The religious and moral principles of Jesus are strictly idealistic and perfect in elevation and scope.

But it has not been the practical aim of Christians to realize the ideals of Jesus. The effective force in their actual cultus has been their *theology*. And while the former are listened to and assented to; while, indeed, with all deductions, they have had, and have, a wide and blessed influence, the moral tendency of the *theology* has been of a widely different character. Its fundamental idea is an immoral one, and the theory of its realization is immoral. The methods of culture growing out of such a scheme must needs be deeply injurious to the moral sense. *And they are.*

What are this idea and theory?

The foundation-idea of the popular theology is *selfish*. It presents, as the object of religious effort, not charac-

ter, not virtue, not holiness, but a selfish benefit, *salvation*. This term, Salvation, has meant rescue and immunity from the consequences of the evil in a man's nature and his life, and his establishment in a state of outward bliss.

Undoubtedly, it has suggested, also, in a sense, the rectification of a man's nature. But this has not been its emphasis. It has been wholly incidental, not essential. It is not the condition or the purpose of the salvation; and it is not procured through that normal exercise of his moral faculties, which alone can make a man really a good man. It is the vague result of a supernatural operation which, because it does not depend on any moral effort of the man himself, has no moral quality, and therefore leaves the man exactly where he was before. No man is a better man who does not become such through his own moral exertions. These are not only not essential in the scheme of salvation, they are expressly disclaimed as an element in it.

Here, then, are a profoundly immoral quality and influence at the very root and heart of the system. To offer any aim to the religious nature except its own development, holiness for holiness's sake, is immoral, demoralizing. Pure religion is no system of *gain* of any kind. To treat it as a means to any end but itself is to abuse it and corrupt its influence.

And to make this *gain*, which is to come from religion, an escape from the just consequences of character, is to offer to men, yet further, a specific immoral object, as I need not stop to argue. It is plainly immoral even to wish to escape the just consequences of what one is and does.

But, as if to cap the climax, and to make the work of demoralization complete and certain, the popular theology has asserted that men are destitute of, or deeply deficient in, moral ability. The popular Church still teaches in its creeds and in its habitual preaching that man is of a sinful *nature*, and cannot, in normal

ways, achieve holiness. It thus discredits morality and discourages moral effort at the outset; for why should one attempt to do that which he cannot do?

But the theology here does a double injury to conscience; for conscience asserts, in each of us, that we *are* morally competent, and that morality is demanded of us by the God who speaks in us. But the popular theory tempts one to disbelieve this voice, and to give up moral effort,—to resign himself, were he consistent, to his own evil tendencies.

Finally, the method by which a man is to secure salvation is, in the popular theology, of an immoral quality. It is to be attained by the substitution of another's merits for one's own, a thing repugnant to morality, if it were conceivable. Morality *consists* in the discharge by each one of his own obligations.

Now, at all points, it is just to say these principles are actually, by believers, qualified and relieved by the unconquerable instincts of the moral nature, and by the truer and sweeter ideas which they receive from the actual religious teachings of him who is the central figure in their artificial and most unsound theological scheme. The holiness and beauty of the character of Jesus could but have a deep influence on the minds of individuals who have truly loved him. His high and exacting, while simple and attractive religious and ethical principles, though so inadequately inculcated, and actually set aside from an essential place in the scheme of salvation, have yet appealed deeply to the native instincts of sincere hearts. Conscience, all the while, has made its protest in favor of righteousness, and men of willing minds have listened to it, despite their creeds. In these days of freedom and progress men begin to reject the more obviously immoral conceptions which pervade their theologies, and thus further their injurious effects are mitigated.

But, in substance, they remain, for in substance the popular theology continues intact and powerful. No leading body has yet parted with any essential element

of it. If its force is not felt as fully as it once was, this is only through the decay of faith in individuals, which is taking place so extensively.

And even this decay is, morally, an unwholesome process! Critically to weigh established opinions, vigorously to reject any we feel to be unsound, is morally a bracing process. But the silent lapse of old faiths, which we take no real pains to replace with new, leaves us halting and half-insincere, if not hypocritical. Myriads go on hearing the popular theology preached; outwardly assenting to it; really not believing it; but taking no just pains to correct their thought and ascertain and assert to themselves the things that *are* true to them. So even these persons go on living without a true and elevating religious faith, however they reject an immoral one. Or, at least, with what truer religious principles they have, confused and largely rendered nugatory by the lingering influence of a false theology they still half-trust.

I repeat that this influence is still, up to the present moment, commandingly potent. It permeates the thought of Christendom; it shapes men's religious culture; it moulds their principles and their character. The orthodox system is beginning, undoubtedly, to yield to the spirit of the age. But its force is little impaired, as yet. And the actual Christian community is what it is, above all things else, because of its theology.

I repeat, then, my friends, that, in my judgment, the too low moral tone of the world at large is, in greatest measure, the result of having a religious system which is underlain and characterized, and its practical methods of culture shaped, by ideas and principles of so profoundly immoral a quality.

It is impossible to estimate how widely and subtly such influences work. If a man's religion is perverted and lowered, everything else will be perverted and lowered for him, for his religion is the sum of his ideals; it is all that is highest for him; it is the in-

spiration and sanction of everything else; that by which he tries everything else. And when you ask why is there so much evil in the world at this late, enlightened day? why is the moral standard of the active, acute, effective part of the community so much below what it should be?—the answer is, above all other things, because they have not had a religion calculated to restrain and inspire them. Conscience has not had the stimulus and training it should have had. The moral sense has not been developed and invigorated, and made quick and controlling by the influences it has been under.

Of course, the principles of morality are taught, formally. The Beatitudes, the two great Commandments, the Golden Rule, are read in church and committed to memory in the Sunday school. *But the virtues are not presented, as Jesus presented them, as the essential things in religion, and, therefore, they are from the outset partly discredited.* All the while morality is made incidental and secondary, not the chief and essential aim and end of life, the highest and infinitely the most exigent element in religion. Youth is not made to feel that the culture of character is *the one* thing in life. To believe, to trust the system, to have faith in the conditions of salvation, *these* are the things it is urged to. *These* are the burthen of preaching. Everywhere the culture is theological, rather than religious, in its emphasis. Its aim is to indoctrinate the elements of the elaborate doctrinal scheme,—*not* to make men good. It is to stimulate a sentimental faith in Christ's person, *not* to develop a robust, brotherly sympathy in the aims of his life, a hearty confidence in and practical acceptance of the moral and religious principles which were about all he offered us. For the *theology* of Jesus was almost wholly comprised in two words, "Our Father," which he scarcely any further elaborated.

The result has been to build up in the religious world a code of artificial, conventional virtues and a false standard of character. It is astonishing how the phenomena of that Pharisaism which Jesus denounced

more vigorously than any other vice have been reproduced by similar causes in the Church which professes to follow him as its Master! He who is very positive about his creed; who observes most strictly and minutely the formal requirements of the cultus; is diligent in church attendance; a rigid Sabbatarian; makes long prayers; wears a countenance of austerity; reads his Bible assiduously (but he must only read to find his creed in it!)—this man is again, nineteen centuries after the Sermon on the Mount, made the type of the religious man and supported by the favor of the religious world. Many and many men who do these things conscientiously are, also, nobly virtuous and truly religious men, as the Pharisees supplied the best element of their nation. But it is not their righteousness, or their true religiousness that gives them their standing, but their faith in the scheme of salvation. Their righteousness without this would be worthless in the light of the creeds—“filthy rags,” only.

But the giving to these things of intellect and form an essential value; giving them the place which belongs only to virtue; offers to conscience a fearful temptation. *The whole moral standard of a people is lowered when it is admitted that anything whatever can possibly be a substitute for simple goodness.*

Moreover, in particular, since belief in theological doctrines is a thing which can be attested only by a man's own assertions, *profession* comes to have a false value as a test of character, and thus a powerful incentive to *hypocrisy* is offered. Men learn easily that the way to secure confidence and honor is by professing a rigid orthodoxy. This wins them the respect which only manifest integrity, purity and elevation of character ought to win. It tends to hide their moral deficiencies even from themselves. Insensibly one may degenerate into an actor, a hypocrite, under such an influence. And if in any man the heart is not by nature sound and true, he will almost certainly, to establish his place among his fellows, practice those

things which are so easy and so profitable, and which cloak his want of moral worth.

Hence that painful spectacle which lately, again, we have had to witness—of men standing high in the religious world who have been so devoid of real goodness that, through years of sanctimonious living, they have practised wholesale dishonesty. And while such are extreme instances, I repeat that they only illustrate the causes which are at work, and that we must ascribe the low tone of business and public morals not more to the greed and coarseness of men than to the unsoundness of the religious training they receive, and to this prevalence of false standards of character offering a perpetual temptation to the moral nature. It is not too much to say that a large portion of the Christian community never, in their Sunday schools or from the pulpits before which they sit, receive genuine and effective moral instruction, such as brings them squarely up, without alternatives or evasions, to the bar of the moral law, and makes them feel adequately the prime importance of righteousness in character and life. Perpetually, rather, they hear righteousness disparaged; not in itself, doubtless, but in comparison with things which conscience must testify to them cannot be compared with moral worth. Habitually they hear there is another and better way to please God and secure salvation. One almost thinks with pity of some flagrant offender, when he reflects how unfavorable the conditions of his moral education may thus have been! Our orthodox friends have been used to scout vigorously those testimonies of God in the soul, which they called “natural religion” and “natural goodness.” But, in fact, these qualities in men half trained and enlightened, have been widely the only safeguards of virtue, and have been sadly needed to offset the demoralizing influences of the popular theology.

What a difference it must have made, my friends, if, through all the centuries of Christian history, the one thing demanded of men as the test of character and

Christian standing had been—what Jesus had explicitly made it—*goodness!* If no evasion of that demand had been possible! If *life* had been the only accepted witness to it! If the whole pressure of the religious world had been to hold men up to strict integrity, purity, charity, for which belief and professions could be no kind of substitute! If religion had been systematically presented not as a scheme for procuring any kind of selfish benefits, but as a career of diligent self-development and unselfish service; not as a habit of greedy and debilitating dependence upon God, as a benefactor from whom unmerited favors could be secured by slavish adulation, but as a life of childlike union with God in the diligent, noble effort to conform character and conduct to the ideals realized in an all-perfect spiritual Being from whom our own powers and instincts are derived!

If, in a word, the simple religion of Jesus had been the law of men's lives, instead of that artificial theological system which has been built up, so untruly and unfortunately, about his personality!

The Sermon on the Mount might still be—it *may* still be!—the charter of a perfected society.

The *hopefulness* of our own time, my friends, lies in the fact that the rectification of thought by which the moral shall be elevated to its true place in religious teaching, by which the principles of him who is the central figure in Christianity shall be given their true place and their due influence as the essential things in religion—that this rectification seems to be beginning. The remarkable upheaval of thought, which is now going on in the Orthodox sects, is not, like the controversies of former periods, a merely doctrinal discontent. It is distinctly *moral*. The renewed and growing assertion of the principle of the freedom of thought, of individual conviction in religion, is a *moral* one, for it is a protest in favor of the supremacy of the individual conscience over external authority. The ground of opposition to some of the doctrines integral in the

creeds, which is growing within the Orthodox pale, is their *immoral* quality, their offensiveness to the natural sense of right and truth, and this is an assertion of the supreme value of the *moral* element in religion. Socially, the ethical principle is gaining, markedly, in influence and authority. It is awakening society to unprecedented activity in every corner of the field of philanthropic duty and moral reform. The age teems with organizations for service to humanity and for the promotion of a purer civilization. To the vigor and liveliness of the moral sense in the great body of believers the present grief and indignation of the religious people of Great Britain over the immoralities of their Prince bear a noble witness, and constitute a fact of the highest promise. He who is in doubt about the progress of morality should compare the sensibility displayed by a class hitherto characterized by a peculiarly staunch loyalty to their political order with the state of feeling existing, say a century ago, on any like points. The "first gentleman" in England has little of the moral latitude he enjoyed in that former period.

There is much reason to hope that, deeply intrenched as the creeds still are, the era of doctrinalism is passing, and that of morality has begun. The day is heralded, though but as a glow upon the horizon, when the whole structure of the immoral doctrinal scheme and the unsound cultus of the supernatural Christianity shall be done away, and the exquisite, axiomatic, ethical-religious principles, which were what Jesus actually offered the world, shall come into the effective sway which has hitherto been denied them. God speed that day!

Whenever, under the comfort and inspiration of a pure, loving, filial faith in God,—a faith not craven, self-seeking and debilitating, but manly, vigorous, self-respecting, however infused with a true humility of spirit,—men shall be systematically taught, from earliest days, that there is no religion without righteousness; that the one aim of being is character; that the

only test of true faith is right life; that the only Salvation is goodness; that the only man who can possibly be acceptable to God is the good man, the god-like man; that the title to the name of Christian belongs only to him who does the will of our Father in heaven, not at all to him who merely calls on Jesus, or on God Himself, with fervent apostrophies,—*then* we shall see the moral standards of the world rising, and such a day of true religion shining as has not yet dawned on Christendom. We shall be spared the spectacle of the religious hypocrite, still so familiar a type. We shall see purity and integrity the characteristics of all men and women who enjoy the confidence and respect of their fellows. We shall see business itself shamed of its low principles and mean practices, purged of its intolerable selfishness and made, like all parts of true human life, a career of service; and communities as well as individuals acknowledging their amenability to the simple law of right.

